

# VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

Democratic Security | Visegrad Group | EU Strategic Agenda

## Problem

The EU's overall democratic security developments are impacted by the events in CEE countries, which are amplified due to the ongoing war. As the new EU Strategic Agenda is in preparation, the Visegrad Insight expert group scans for weak signals across multiple scenarios and recommends a relevant course of action.

## Key facts

The notion of the centre of gravity shifting in the EU remains contested. But CEE events are increasingly impactful for the EU.

Petr Pavel won a presidential race in Czechia on a ticket of moderation vs illiberalism.

Slovakia decided on snap elections (30/9/2023).

## Foresight

In Slovakia and Poland, societal polarisation is likely to increase, potentially leading to a decline in trust in the electoral process and resulting in weaker governments.

As migration fears decrease in the region, inflation is becoming a significant threat.

The outcome of Ukraine's spring offensive will impact the hawkish CEE governments' policies.

## Centre of gravity – but not for democratic security

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Czechia, democratic security prevails over illiberalism. The presidential campaign was won by the pro-Ukraine, pro-EU and pro-NATO positions of Petr Pavel. Meanwhile, Russia's war on Ukraine has propelled the issues of military and energy security to the forefront of political discourse.
- Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party maintains its public opinion support for the October elections despite patronage scandals, the cost of living crisis and suspended EU funds for lack of the rule of law reforms. The party's commitment to defence and tough stance on Russia are factors for its popularity.
- Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been deemed a new centre of gravity but identity politics and Euroscepticism remain potent political drivers. Those two trends erode the potential constructive influence on EU policies. Particularly Poland, during the electoral year, may waste its chance, despite its sterling response to the war on Ukraine.
- Media freedom and integrity of elections remain an issue in broader CEE. But the EU's Media Freedom Act is nearly ignored in the countries like Hungary or Poland.
- Energy transition and sustainability of the CEE export-led economic model remain huge challenges for the region, and the reduction of fossil fuels dependence is very gradual with a negative impact on economic competitiveness and energy poverty.
- High inflation combined with slow growth and falling real incomes will remain in focus in the coming months, impacting the election cycle in Poland and Slovakia.



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## About

### Project

Visegrad Insight is the main Central European analysis and media platform. It generates future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners. Established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation.

Foresight on European Values and Democratic Security (FEVDS). This project engages CEE experts in a foresight-driven debate on the future EU policy development to protect European values and freedoms.

[visegradinsight.eu/foresight-european-values](https://visegradinsight.eu/foresight-european-values)

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the EU is already looking into the next priorities of the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029. Yet, the civil society in CEE countries is primarily occupied in the present-day vital challenges to the democratic setup. It is, therefore, of paramount importance to aggregate the voices promoting European values and freedom from this region and bring them forward in the EU policy debate.

This brief covers trends and potential triggers of change relevant to the "Democracy action plan",<sup>1</sup> "EU citizenship report 2020",<sup>2</sup> and "EU Rule of Law report".<sup>3</sup> Its structure reflects also on the areas which impact the democratic security in the member states and the EU overall. For monitoring purposes, the research has been adopting recommendations from the European Parliament briefing "EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023: From concept to capacity"<sup>4</sup> and our own foresight report "War and the Future of Europe"<sup>5</sup> in which we proposed to redefine strategic autonomy as independence from foreign malign influence in the transatlantic space. The briefing proposes to consider a 360-degree approach to strategic autonomy, which includes democratic institutions and values next to industrial policies or digital challenges. In consequence, it sheds light on how virtually unrelated factors may become weak signals that shape the democratic setup.

The CEE region faces complex challenges, including war, malign actors, high cost of living and adapting to the Green Transition. The region heavily relies on external actors for resources and strategic decisions, making it crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach involving multiple sectors and stakeholders to assert its own voice and interests on the global stage. Strategic autonomy is crucial for the EU to address shared challenges and promote mutual interests, but it needs to be better understood and placed within a timeline of events.

<sup>1</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mycitizenrights.eu/files/en/Citizen-Report-EN.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/rule-law-mechanism/2022-rule-law-report\\_en#documents](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/rule-law-mechanism/2022-rule-law-report_en#documents)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733589](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589)

<sup>5</sup> <https://visegradinsight.eu/war-and-the-future-of-europe>

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## POLITICS

### *Between European Unity and Disunity*

National politics determines many outcomes for the EU. One of the most important in terms of democratic security is the eventual unity or disunity on the Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP). The state of play in terms of electoral results and coalition building would often determine the ability of the EU to act (or not) together to protect its interests and values.

The V4 countries align on the EU's CSDP, with weak signs of coordination between Czechia, Poland and Slovakia. Czechia's municipal, senate and presidential election results did not indicate war fatigue, but there are signs of strain in Slovakia, which – along with Poland – is preparing for elections in Q3. A potential risk is Slovakia's shift away from transatlantic and EU unity if former PM Robert Fico manages to form a viable cabinet after the 30 September vote. Poland's election may soothe past tensions within the EU and strengthen its voice, but a weaker, internally polarised government with an unstable majority is more likely.

## SECURITY

### *Collective Defence or Unilateral Action*

The defence system and the political system are closely intertwined, and democratic civilian oversight of the military is essential to prevent potential authoritarianism. To combat foreign threats, transparent and committed multilateral engagement is necessary to maintain the unity of democracies. While the EU can adapt to new challenges, it is primarily an extension of the existing NATO framework. Constructive democratic security is achieved through the capacity and willingness to cooperate with others, while unilateral defence policies with undertones of isolationism or nationalism ultimately weaken the democratic structure.

With the shift in the political centre of gravity for security decision-making, CEE countries cannot rely on France and Germany to lead the European pillar of security in the NATO alliance. With Finland's entry into NATO, the Eastern Flank extends northward by 1,300 km, consolidating its importance

in deterring Russian aggression. This may lead to a division of defence responsibilities within the EU – NATO's Eastern Flank focused on Russia, while France, Italy, Spain and Greece are on the south. Germany may need to contribute to both. The main challenge that needs to be addressed is the trust deficit between member states regarding collective defence.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### *Enlarged EU or the Ivory-Tower*

The key significance of the European project has been bringing in more member states on board to strengthen democracy and the single market on the continent. CEE countries advocate for the further enlargement of the EU, but there are developments within the EU and the EU neighbourhood as to whether it will continue to enlarge or whether there will be an ivory-tower Europe.

Expanding EU membership in the Western Balkans promises increased stability in the region still suffering from ethnic tensions, corruption, crime and malign interference of third parties. Ukraine's and Moldova's EU aspirations loom large on the EU's agenda. The debate about the best path of integration focuses on institutional reforms that are required in the EU. The questions of majority voting, better democratic security and rule of law safeguards are raised by some EU states. This poses a dilemma to CEE countries – most of them are reluctant to embrace majority voting, but they are also lukewarm about proposals to create a "second tier" membership as a substitute. The picture is complicated by divisions on enlargement priorities among CEE nations and rising Euroscepticism and democratic backsliding.

## ENERGY

### *Between Dependence and Interdependence*

Energy independence constitutes a key ambition of the European Union's Green Deal. It contributes to the democratic security of member states by making them and Europe less dependent on imports of fossil fuels, especially from potentially hostile players. Innovative energy production improves democratic resilience. Renewable installations enable a decentralised energy generation that

empowers citizens and limits potential political abuse of those in energy poverty risk.

Energy security and the greening of the energy mix remain key challenges for V4 countries. With the mild winter cushioning the impact of switching away from Russian gas and coal, the V4 countries were spared major disruptions of energy supply for industry and households during Q1, but prices remain high, aggravating the cost of living crisis and cutting into industrial margins. Securing supply and meeting Green Transition goals remains constrained by ideological as well as economic constraints. The challenge is toughest for Poland, which under the current Eurosceptic government, has hindered the development of renewables and proved unable to accelerate the development of nuclear power, which both constitute the only path for the industry-heavy economy to boost energy independence and meet emission goals within the EU framework.

## ECONOMY & TECH

### *Prosperity for All or the Few*

Since 1989, the democratic transition in Central Europe promised a holy triad of democracy, prosperity (via social market economy) and collective security (NATO). Democracy and the market economy drove economic development and enabled most countries to join the EU. Despite overall improved prosperity, fair distribution of economic opportunities and inequality moderation remain challenging. The digital age has heightened anxieties about work and social roles. After 30 years of growth based on low wages and foreign investment, Central European countries must seek new growth models to legitimise their democracies.

The energy crisis is a key factor determining the V4's ability to continue catching up with Western levels of prosperity. Following earlier pandemic-era disruption to supply chains and loose fiscal and monetary policies, the energy crisis pushed inflation rates to levels almost twice as high as the EU average. This was acute in Poland and Hungary, where central bank independence has been undermined, reflecting a broader trend in these two countries towards the capture of independent regulators. Both economies suffer from creeping oligarchisation and a deteriorating business environment,

which may hobble their ability to regain momentum and provide equitable benefits of growth to wider society.

## INFORMATION SOVEREIGNTY

### *Plurality of Sources*

The media environment in CEE has significantly deteriorated, and the EU's new Media Act aims to ensure democratic security by promoting public media systems and addressing issues related to media ownership structures. Despite the press's recognition as the democratic fourth estate, its limitations vary in each country, and the outlook depends on the plurality of independent sources and access to reliable and diverse information. While the EU has acknowledged attacks on media freedom and pluralism in member states like Hungary and Poland, its response has been limited and fragmented, making it crucial to monitor the triggers for independent public opinion and risks to independent journalism's pluralism.

Intimidation against journalists in the V4 remains high as governments continue their smear campaigns from pro-government channels. The media sphere continues to be consolidated by pro-government buyers in Hungary and Poland, decreasing the plurality of news sources for its citizenry. Disinformation campaigns sponsored by Russia, China and extremist groups in V4 are at an all-time high, leading to increased levels of mistrust in governmental institutions and threatening democratic security as a whole.

## RULE OF LAW

### *State Capture or Independence*

A weakened rule of law in CEE leads to further state capture, where powerful actors manipulate the state's institutions to serve their own interests at the expense of the public good. Weak rule of law enables co-optation and subversion of state institutions, leading to a concentration of power, reduced competition and lack of accountability. To prevent state capture, efforts to strengthen the rule of law should include judicial independence, transparency, accountability and protection of civil society and media rights.

The EU and other CEE countries should take heed of the failure of the Hungarian and Polish governments to tackle systematic corruption. Hungary's potential links with the Kremlin and its use as an EU base highlight the need for neighbouring countries like Czechia, Poland and Slovakia to prioritise anti-corruption efforts for their own security. Unfortunately, recent developments suggest state capture is a persistent trend in the region, with democratic institutions being co-opted by the state through rule-bending and rule-breaking, resulting in ongoing democratic backsliding. In Poland's case, the use of spyware to interfere with the opposition's election campaign threatened election integrity.

## SOCIETY

### *Polarisation vs Cohesion*

Polarisation in democratic societies is rising globally on the back of culture wars and identity politics, often descending into tribal political warfare. This is a test for democratic resilience in CEE, understood in terms of respecting EU values, ensuring a smooth transition of power in the electoral process, and the ability to pursue socially equitable, balanced policies. Social cohesion and democratic security can fall victim to polarisation, enabling actors to offer a more authoritarian model of governance as a viable alternative.

Authoritarian tendencies are on the rise in CEE, with governments in Poland and Hungary limiting civil society space, criticising human rights groups and using legal restrictions or intimidation tactics against NGOs and independent media. The deteriorating quality of legislative processes continues, limiting evidence-based policies and consultations with stakeholders. This undermines the check civil society has on executive power and poses troubling implications for democracy. It limits the scope for policies that support equitable social harmony, with governing parties focusing on direct financial transfers to their electoral base rather than increasing the quality of public services.

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